DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 152 SP 037 797

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TITLE	Training Rural Special Educators to Transition to the Workplace: Lessons for Small Teacher Education Programs.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	12p.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Diversity (Student); *Education Work Relationship; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Interpersonal Competence; Practicums; Preservice Teacher Education; Relevance (Education); *Rural Education; *Special Education Teachers; Teaching Skills

ABSTRACT

There are many important workplace issues that must be considered when training rural special educators, particularly those who come from small rural environments with limited diversity. Teacher education programs and rural educators view practicum experiences as integral in transitioning from the training program to the diverse challenges of the workplace. Rural special education teachers face many transitional challenges. It is important that they have competencies in interpersonal skills (e.g., interviewing and counseling) and in the delivery of services for students with disabilities. However, most training programs do not require them to take courses in counseling or interpersonal skills. In order to implement culturally responsive teaching in higher education, it is imperative that special educators are taught using active learning techniques designed to promote the development of culturally sensitive professional judgment. Rural university training programs must also integrate strategies into their coursework that help trainees focus on their performance and growth in acquiring professional skills. Special educators must be well trained in the knowledge base in order to meet the demands of the rural workplace. They must have a progression of experiences that culminate in the practicum. However, the supervision and practicum experience will only be effective if the feedback is related to the knowledge base and is perceived as clear and explicit by the recipients. (Contains 9 references.) (SM)

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Training Rural Special Educators to Transition to the Workplace: Lessons for Small Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

University training programs and rural educators are dedicated to providing quality educational opportunities to preservice students in special education. These professionals are concerned that the progression of learning experiences adequately trains students to transition to the real life demands of the rural workplace setting.

Training Special Educators to Transition to the Workplace: Lessons for Teacher Education Programs

Teacher education programs are continually scrutinized through internal and external reviews. These reviews attempt to evaluate the standards through which these programs accomplish their objectives of preparing individuals to leave the university with job-ready professional skills. The broad array of competencies that must be achieved in order to meet these professional standards in special education is daunting for the person who is a preservice student in May or December and a professional in August or January.

Among the competencies and expectations for program accreditations and state certifications is the ability to interact with, and address the concerns of, individuals who represent an increasingly diverse workplace, caseload, and classroom. Helping the students achieve these standards and make this transition is a major challenge for university training programs, especially programs that train rural special educators who can expect a future in which they will increasingly work often with children from a variety of cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. In regions like our own in western Kentucky, these trainees are, themselves, often from small rural environments where community diversity was limited and students had little experiences with cultures and racial groups outside their own. The primary purpose of this chapter is to outline

some very special lessons for the workplace in training special educators.

In special education the pinnacle of the training program is the practicum. Teacher education programs and rural educators view practicum experiences as integral in the transitioning from training program to the diverse challenges of the workplace (Birk & Brooks, 1986; Branch, 1990; Espe-Sherwindt, 1991). The practicum experience has been seen as the vehicle for transforming the classroom experiences into real world applications. Yet student teachers interviewed by Johnston (1994) perceived practicum experiences as good, but artificial experiences. As such, they were not considered to be valuable or necessary learning experiences by the student teachers in his study. These subjects stated that the practicum experiences had little to do with helping them transition to challenges of the "real" workplace.

The term, transition, suggests that there are processes involved that transform the protected preservice student into a fully accountable professional. Implicit in the application to teacher education is the assumption that the transformation processes are orderly, appropriately staged, and built into the overall training process. It is also apparent that certain competencies acquired through this transformation are not direct. That is, pedagogy is not a direct result of, nor transformation from, didacticism - just as independent, professional service delivery involves more than satisfactory completion of practicum

experiences. To question where and how such a transformation takes place does not yield easy answers.

The transitional challenges faced by the new rural special education teacher are many. A synthesis of these challenges reported in the literature results in two generalities. Upon entering the workplace, new rural special education teachers are required to be generally competent in many areas. Especially important are competencies in interpersonal skills, including interviewing and counseling (Curtis & Nestor, 1990; DeVivo, Fowler, & Marotz, 1984; Ocansey, 1987) and in the delivery of services for children with disabilities (Branch, 1990; Centra, 1990). Skills in each area represent the heart of the intervention carried out with every child with disabilities and therefore, must include development of multicultural knowledge and sensitivities. The focus of concern is how to train and how to provide experiences that allow the special educator to transition to demands of the rural workplace and its special diversities.

Evidence from most training programs indicate that trainees in special education are not required to take training courses in either counseling nor interpersonal skills (Curtis & Nestor, 1990; DeVivo et al., 1984). Often this means that learning to develop effective partnership skills tends to be left as a set of skills acquired somewhere during the transitional period. Yet it is not uncommon for students to take a back seat in training programs in interpersonal interactions with parents and

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professionals other than their immediate supervisory teacher. For example, there are few circumstances in which students are allowed to initiate interactions with parents, teachers, or other members of an assessment or rehabilitation team. In order to implement culturally responsive teaching in higher education, it is imperative that special educators are taught using active learning techniques designed to promote the development of culturally sensitive professional judgment.

Two aspects of the assessment process call for non-standard, interpersonal approaches, namely, the initial interview (to acquire information) and the final interview (to provide information). Both interviews are structured on the principles of counseling. In addition to its central role in assessment, the interview sets the stage for collaboration among parents, teachers, and members of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary teams. Success in interpersonal interactions therefore becomes critical in the learning process, especially for effective communication with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The second general challenge faced by the transitioning professional is to directly serve children with disabilities. Delivery of service is viewed as one of the major strengths of most training programs and the one to which the most instructional time is devoted. Branch (1990) suggests that within the instructional environment, the new professional must perform many complex roles in designing, developing, implementing, and monitoring instruction. There have been

literally hundreds of studies conducted on the effectiveness of practicum experiences on ability to provide services to children with disabilities. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of confusion and contradiction surrounding the existing data.

One trend is that while special educators feel confident in their ability to comprehend the knowledge base presented in their training programs, they feel less confident in their ability to perform either under supervision or in the practicum setting, regardless of the number of years experience. At least one professional commented that the workplace, in her experience, was the place to refine skills and to improve professionalism.

The implication of this finding is that rural university training programs must integrate strategies into their coursework that help their trainees focus on their performance and growth in acquiring professional skills. The use of performance-based assessments throughout the training program might help trainees feel more confident in their growing skills. Training programs could implement continuous assessment plans with their trainees, providing continuous data on their strengths and weaknesses. Self reflection on performance helps the early professional in objectivity.

The second and surprising trend is that training issues, specifically in requesting information and in developing partnerships, have been found to be more important than either supervision or practicum experiences in developing partnerships in some studies. That means that a clear progression of

experiences occurs from acquisition of knowledge base to the workplace may not occur. Zeichner (1980) suggests that the impact of the supervisory teacher and the ecological environment will directly impinge upon the ability of the transitioning professional to do his/her work. Further, he suggests that these effects will be both positive and negative. Others disagree, suggesting that how the knowledge is transmitted, perceived, and processed prior to the practicum experience will more directly affect the ability of the transitioning professional to provide services. The experience of the hands-on participation simply reinforces the understanding.

Ocansey (1987) concurs. However, he suggests that the feedback given by the university faculty must be explicit and clear. He concluded that vague and implicit feedback is perceived as useless by trainees. The implications of this study therefore suggest that the participants perceived training in the knowledge base as more important perhaps because it was explicit information. Supervision and practicum experiences were perceived only as useful depending upon the individual supervision and practicum situations. Perhaps the use of case study teaching methodology would aid in providing earlier, more explicit feedback to trainees. The use of portfolios throughout the training period could allow for multiple opportunities to give explicit, clear feedback to trainees. Designation of coursework as communication intensive can allow for students to meet requirements using oral presentations, debates, role plays,

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written essays, journals, mapping, or other communication techniques.

Summary

The purpose of this review was to provide some exploratory information on the perceptions of special educators on the progression of their experiences in a rural university training program. The implications are twofold for rural university training programs. First is that special educators must be well trained in the knowledge base in order to meet the demands of the rural workplace. Second is that special educators must have a progression of experiences culminating in the practicum. However, the supervision and practicum experiences will only be effective if the feedback is related to the knowledge base and is perceived as clear and explicit by the recipients. We suggest that further research with a larger sample size be directed towards this progression of experiences in training programs. Perceptions of students, university faculty, and rural educators involved in the practicum experiences should also be measured. We feel that further information such as this is critical for university faculty, rural educators, and students alike.

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